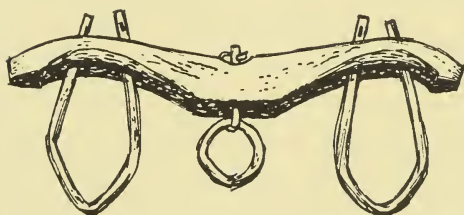


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Lincoln's second  
inaugural address.

LINCOLN ROOM



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LINCOLN'S SECOND  
INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Its Background  
and  
Development

Compiled By  
RICHARD W. BYRNE



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(1)

## THE ADDRESS

### “THE ALMIGHTY HAS HIS OWN PURPOSES”

March 4, 1865

Fellow Countrymen:

At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it — all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving* the Union, without war—insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war, one of them would *make* war, rather than let the nation survive, and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the nation, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar

and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war; while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with



the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether".

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

(2)

## BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

### (a) FROM THE HOLY BIBLE — CATHOLIC

- I 3 Genesis 19. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth, out of which thou wast taken; for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return."
- II 18 (19) Psalm 10. "The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; The ordinances of the Lord are true, all of them just."
- III 3 Josue 10. "And again he said: 'By this you shall know that the Lord the living God is in the midst of you, and he shall destroy before your sight the Chanaanite and the Hethite, the Hevite and the Pherezite, the Gergesite also and the Jebusite and the Amorrite."
- IV 7 Matthew 1. "Do not judge, that you may not be judged." 2. "For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged; and with what measure you measure, it shall be measured to you."

V 18 Matthew 7. "Woe to the world because of scandals! For it must needs be that scandals come, but woe to the man through whom scandal does come!"

(b) FROM THE HOLY BIBLE — KING JAMES VERSION

I 3 Genesis 19. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return."

II 19 Psalm 9. "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

III 3 Joshua 10. "And Joshua said hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you . . ."

IV 19 Leviticus 15. "Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment; thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty; but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor."

V 7 Matthew 1. "Judge not, that ye be not judged.

2. "For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."

VI 5 Isaiah 18. "Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity and sin as it were with a cart-rope."

VII 18 Matthew 7. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"

(3)

MEDITATION ON THE DIVINE WILL

September 2, 1862

"The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be and one *must* be wrong. God can not be *for* and *against*

the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purposes of either party — and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do are the best adaptation to effect His purpose, I am almost ready to say this is probably true — that God wills this contest and wills that it shall not end yet. By His mere quiet power on the minds of the now contestants, He could have *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds."

According to Nicolay and Hay, "It was not written to be seen of men . . ."

Quite possibly the meditation was written as early as September 2, 1862 at which time following the Second Battle of Bull Run, Lincoln seems to have plumbed his lowest depths and was reported by Attorney General Bates to have "seemed wrung by the bitterest anguish — said he felt almost ready to hang himself".

(4)

#### CORRESPONDENCE WITH MRS. ELIZA P. GURNEY

Mrs. Gurney was the widow and third wife of Joseph J. Gurney, English Quaker, philanthropist and religious writer. She led a delegation to visit Lincoln and had carried on a correspondence with him.

#### REPLY TO ELIZA P. GURNEY

October 26, 1862

I am glad of this interview and glad to know that I have your sympathy and prayers. We are indeed going through

a great trial — a fiery trial. In the very responsible position in which I happen to be placed, being a humble instrument in the hands of our Heavenly Father, as I am, and as we all are, to work out His great purposes, I have desired that all my works and acts may be according to His will and that it might be so I have sought His aid — but if after endeavoring to do my best in the light which He affords me, I find my efforts fail, I must believe that for some purpose unknown to me, He wills it otherwise. If I had my way, this war would never have been commenced. If I had been allowed my way the war would have been ended before this, but we find it still continues; and we must believe that He permits it for some wise purpose of his own, mysterious and unknown to us; and though with our limited understanding we may not be able to comprehend it, yet we cannot but believe, that He who made the world still governs it.

Executive Mansion  
Washington, September 4, 1864.

Eliza P. Gurney  
My esteemed friend:

I have not forgotten — probably — never shall forget — the very impressive occasion when yourself and friends visited me on a Sabbath forenoon two years ago. Nor has your kind letter, written nearly a year later, ever been forgotten. In all, it has been your purpose to strengthen my reliance on God. I am much indebted to the good Christian people of the country for their constant prayers and consolations; and to no one of them, more than to yourself. The purposes of the Almighty are perfect and must prevail though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance. We hope for a happy termination of this terrible

war long before this but God knows best and has ruled otherwise. We shall yet acknowledge His wisdom and our own error therein. Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us, trusting that so working still conduces to the great ends He ordains. Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make and no mortal could stay.

Your people — the Friends — have had, and are having, a very great trial. On principle and faith opposed to both war and oppression they can only practically oppose oppression by war. In this hard dilemma some have chosen one horn and some the other. For those appealing to me on conscientious grounds, I have done, and shall do, the best I could and can, in my conscience, under my oath to the law. That you believe this I doubt not, and believing it, I shall still receive, for our country and myself, your earnest prayers to our Father in Heaven.

Your sincere friend,  
A. Lincoln.

(5)  
LETTER TO MR. A. G. HODGES  
OF FRANKFORT, KENTUCKY

Governor Bramlette of Kentucky, Albert G. Hodges, editor of the Frankfort, Kentucky "*Commonwealth*" and Archibald Dixon, former Senator from Kentucky, 1852-1855 met with Lincoln on March 26, 1864 to discuss border state problems. Orville H. Browning in his "*Diary*" under date of April 3, 1864 records the visit: "The President told me that a few days before Governor Bramlette of Kentucky, Hon. Archibald Dixon and Mr. Hodge of the same state had called upon him in regard to the enlistment of slaves as soldiers in Kentucky in reference to which there has been

much dissatisfaction in that state and that every thing had been amicably adjusted between them and they had gone home satisfied. He said when they were discussing the matter he asked them to let him make a little speech to them which he did and with which they were much pleased. That afterwards Mr. Hodges came back to him and asked him to give him a copy of his remarks to take with him to Kentucky. He told Mr. Hodges that what he had said was not written and that he had not then time to commit it to paper — but to go home and he would write him a letter in which he would give, as nearly as he could all that he had said to them orally . . .”

A. G. Hodges, Esq.  
Frankfort, Ky.

Executive Mansion  
Washington, April 4, 1864.

My dear Sir:

You ask me to put in writing the substance of what I verbally said the other day in your presence to Governor Bramlette and Senator Dixon. It was about as follows:

“I am naturally antislavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think and feel. And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling. It was in the oath I took that I would, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. I could not take the office without taking the oath. Nor was it my view that I might take an oath to get power and break the oath in using the power. I understood, too, that in ordinary civil administration this oath even forbade me to practically indulge my primary abstract judgment on the moral question of slavery. I had publicly declared this many times and in many ways. And I aver that, to this

day, I have done no official act in mere deference to my abstract judgment and feeling on slavery. I did understand however, that my oath to preserve the Constitution to the best of my ability, imposed upon me the duty of preserving, by every indispensable means that government — that nation — of which that Constitution was the organic law. Was it possible to lose the nation and yet preserve the Constitution? By general law life and limb must be protected; yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb. I felt that measures, otherwise, unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the Constitution through the preservation of the nation. Right or wrong, I assumed this ground and now avow it. I could not feel that, to the best of my ability, I had even tried to preserve the Constitution, if, to save slavery, or any minor matter I should permit the wreck of government, country and Constitution all together. When, early in the war, General Fremont attempted military emancipation, I forbade it, because I did not think it an indispensable necessity. When a little later, General Cameron, then Secretary of War, suggested the arming of the blacks, I objected because I did not yet think it an indispensable necessity. When, still later, General Hunter attempted emancipation, I again forbade it, because I did not yet think the indispensable necessity had come. When, in March, and May and July 1862 I made earnest and successive appeals to the border states to favor compensated emancipation, I believed the indispensable necessity for military emancipation and arming the blacks would come, unless averted by that measure. They declined the proposition, and I was in my best judgment, driven to the alternative of either surrendering the Union, and with it, the Constitution, or of laying strong hand upon the colored

element, I choose the latter. In choosing it, I hoped for greater gain than loss, but I was not entirely confident. More than a year of trial now shows no loss by it in our foreign relations, none in home popular sentiment, none in our white military force — no loss by it any how or any where. On the contrary, it shows a gain of quite a hundred and thirty thousand soldiers, seamen and laborers. These are palpable facts about which as facts there can be no cavilling. We have the men and we could not have had them without the measure.

“And now let any Union man who complains of the measure test himself by writing down in one line that he is for subduing the rebellion by force of arms, and in the next that he is for taking these hundred and thirty thousand men from the Union side and placing them where they would be but for the measure he condemns. If he can not face his case so stated, it is only because he can not face the truth.”

I add a word which was not in the verbal conversation. In telling this tale I attempt no compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years' struggle the nation's condition is not what either party or any man devised or expected, God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.

Yours truly,  
A. Lincoln



(6)  
THE PRESIDENT'S LAST, SHORTEST  
AND BEST SPEECH

December 6, 1864

On Thursday of last week two ladies from Tennessee came before the President asking the release of their husbands held as prisoners of war at Johnson's Island. They were put off till Friday when they came again and were again put off to Saturday. At each of the interviews one of the ladies urged that her husband was a religious man. On Saturday the President ordered the release of the prisoners and then said to this lady: "You say your husband is a religious man. Tell him when you meet him that I say I am not much of a judge of religion, but that, in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help *some* men to eat their bread on the sweat of *other* men's faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven!"

A. Lincoln

(7)  
LETTER TO THURLOW WEED, ESQ.

Executive Mansion  
Washington, March 15, 1865

Thurlow Weed, Esq.

My dear Sir:

Every one likes a compliment. Thank you for yours on my little notification speech and on the recent Inaugural Address. I expect the latter to wear as well as — perhaps better than — any thing I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being

shown that there has been a difference between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told, and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it.

Yours truly,  
A. Lincoln

(8)

“It was Earl Curzon, the Chancellor of the University of Oxford, who, on November 6, 1913, said that there are three supreme masterpieces of the English language. One is William Pitt’s toast to the victory at Trafalgar; the second, the Gettysburg Address; and the third, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. Of these last two speeches Earl Curzon has this to declare:

“They were uttered by a man who had been a country farmer and district lawyer before he became a statesman. But they are among the glories and treasures of mankind. I escape the task of deciding which is the masterpieces of modern English eloquence, by awarding the prize to an American.’

“Such, also, is the verdict of humanity.”

“Three Lincoln Masterpieces” by Benjamin Barondess, p. 47.

(9)

a. Contemporary opinion:

I. Charles F. Adams, Jr., wrote his father who was the United States Minister to Great Britain:

“What do you think of the inaugural? That rail-splitting lawyer is one of the wonders of the day. Once at Gettysburg and now again on a greater occasion

he has shown a capacity for rising to the demands of the hour which we should not expect from orators or men of the schools. This inaugural strikes me in its grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historical keynote of the war; in it people seemed to speak in the sublimely simple utterance of ruder times. What will Europe think of this utterance of the rude ruler, of whom they have nourished so lofty a contempt? Not a prince or minister in all Europe could have risen to such an equality with the occasion."

II. Richard H. Hutton, editor of the "London Spectator" wrote:

"It struck a new, universal and almost transcendental note. It was a declaration so dateless and so capable of general human application that the ranks of Tuscony could scarcely forbear to cheer. Not only in England but also throughout Europe men stopped their walking and talking, as a crowd does when it realizes that someone is praying aloud . . . We cannot read it without a renewed conviction that it is the noblest document known to history . . . Certainly none written in a period of passionate conflict ever so completely excluded the partiality of victorious factions and breathed so pure a strain of mingled justice and mercy."

b. Later opinion:

Rev. William E. Barton, D. D.:

"The second Inaugural Address measures the intellectual power and moral purpose of Abraham Lincoln at highwater mark. Noble as was the Gettysburg Address, this rises to a still higher level of nobility. Perhaps there is no state paper in the history of the government of modern nations that breathes so distinctly a religious tone. The first inaugural was conciliatory, patient and persuasive; the second embodied a spirit as generous and devout as it was wise and statesmanlike . . . It is the greatest of the addresses of Abraham Lincoln and registers his intellectual and spiritual power at their highest altitude."

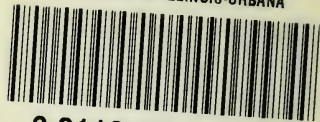








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